Possibility and Community in the Works of Wendell Berry: A Literary Memoir

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Nearly ten years after I had first corresponded with Wendell Berry (which was the initial impetus for the following essay), he invited me out to his home in Port Royal, Kentucky for an interview. It just didn't seem right to take the four-lane interstate to our meeting when I could watch winter against the backdrop of the Kentucky River Valley. So, I twisted around hard curves and windy roads with a smattering of barns, shacks, and other humble dwellings dotting the road on either side. In the quiet car, listening to the cold wind rush past, I kept the river on my left and the steep hillside on my right. The Berry home is built on the side of a tall hill; its driveway is lined with an unpainted and weathered wood fence that keeps in a handful of sheep, clumped closely together against the frigid, gray day. "Nell," Tanya and Wendell Berry's black and white Collie mix, came from behind the house to greet me.

Inside the front room, warmed by a wood-burning stove and lined with books on the back wall shelves, Berry sat in a wooden rocker that creaked back and forth as he looked out the picture window at the Kentucky River below us. He was a tall, snow-capped man with a spring smile and fresh, pink cheeks. The Sunday of my arrival he was dressed in brown corduroys and a button-down shirt layered under a sweater with handsome leather buttons and a tweed jacket. His unassuming appearance and the rustic surroundings could not mask the spry intelligence evident in his bright blue eyes.

Within moments of our first meeting, I felt as if we were old friends as we chatted about my studies, politics, and shared acquaintances. Soon we were laughing about our children and the fact that we were both children who had been reared in the country. In short, in spite of myself, I realized that we were making "community."

We all have a starting point—a line of demarcation—when we begin to define ourselves as writers. Perhaps a spiritual awakening pointed us toward our possibility as writers. Maybe the muse spoke to us for the first time. Perhaps, our lives were altered after a book we read and we coveted a melodious harmony of words that belonged to another.

My spiritual awakening happened when I read the first line of an untitled poem attributed to Wendell Berry in *Kentucky Portrait in Paradox, 1900-1950*:

> The generational disconnection that affects us:
> All times, we assume, are different: we therefore
> have nothing to learn from our elders, nothing to teach our children.
> Civilization is thus reduced to a sequence of last-minute improvisations,
> desperately building today out of the wreckage of yesterday. (1-5)

The poem succinctly expressed the profound sense of alienation the current generation feels toward each other and the past, while at the same time illuminating for me the fundamental need we all have to feel part of a community and for a real sense of authentic individual possibility[1] in the modern world. The effect of the poem was to initiate my own quest for literary fulfillment. In this poem, Wendell Berry challenges the apparent contemporary familial disconnect many (if not most of us feel) in contemporary life by calling out for elders to teach and to nurture the young, while at the same time, asking the young to care for the old. Berry's prescription—if followed—would help to sustain the earth and by extension the human community to which we all belong. For Berry, discrete, micro-communities can take root and lie fallow for years if need be, but in time, these tiny grassroots communities can be the seeds for growing a much larger, perhaps global civilization. Indeed, I discovered, through reading Wendell Berry's work, that many of his various characters found their own sense of individual possibility right where they were, close to the land, and that all were an inspiration for my own search for a literary community.

I was fascinated with the words in the untitled poem and wrote my first fan letter ever to Wendell Berry. In that letter, I set forth questions regarding the possibility of my own literary attempts for social change that I had modeled after his poem. In a virtual overnight, handwritten response, Berry encouraged my exploration into the generational disconnections that affect us. Later, when I met him at a reading, he was also very encouraging. He even remembered my letter when we spoke. The reading of the poem and writing of the letter initiated not only my inquiry into the poem but also my foray into literature in general. I soon began to immerse myself into Wendell Berry's own literary and spiritual journey as I pored over his published fiction, essays and poetry. I discovered in Berry's work a profound influence of the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who had written extensively about building individual possibility through the husbandry of the land and power of community.

Wendell Berry expresses an early example of his own sense possibility through his deep connection with the land in a letter he wrote to fellow Kentucky writer Ed McClanahan after completing graduate work at Stanford and his teaching fellowships at New York University and abroad in England and Italy:

> I think the crisis of my life was the discovery that I was a Henry County poet, a kind of creature that, so far as I knew, had no precedent in creation and that I was feared as contrary to evolutionary law. I think I went around for years suspicioning that I was the sole member of an otherwise non-existent species. It was like I began with one foot on the ground, very uncertainly balanced and all my work has been the slow descent of the other foot. Now I think the other foot has come all the way down and planted itself in Henry County along with its mate. And that was the only way I could get my head free of the fear and the combativeness I used to feel. I mean, when a Henry County poet begins at last to see himself as one of the natural possibilities of Henry County and not an evolutionary accident, then he quits worrying so much about getting stomped out and begins going out grinning, saying over and over to himself "I am possible. I am possible." (McClanahan)

This letter—Berry's acknowledgment of the realization of his own sense of possibility as a farmer and a poet and not an "evolutionary accident"—could serve as an exemplary testament to any writer's coming of age and search for a literary community. Yet, Berry admits that finding one's way is not necessarily easy in our modern society, especially if that route takes you back home to the land. He states at one point, "You know, the education system doesn't educate people to stay at home; if you are recognized by somebody with some talent or ability, the message is that you've got to leave, but I did like it here (Henry County)….I remember at the time we were academic vagabonds of some kind—I didn't really sense the possibility of my success as a poet in Henry County" (McClanahan). Yet, that was exactly what he did. Once Berry recognized Henry County as his chosen community, he was able to begin building his literary home and fulfilling his own sense of possibility as a poet and literary figure.

Although we all try to define our own sense of community and seek it out or allow its presentation to us in a myriad of ways, Wendell Berry's sense of place-based community and his core belief in it consistently defines each of his literary and social contributions. Berry's definition of community resonates in each character, story line, essay and poem he creates, yet all are anchored in his beloved Henry County, Kentucky. Berry's sense of community is the reason he left New York University—"practically the literary center of the universe"—to come back to Henry County. As Berry told me in our interview, "The advice that I was getting from nearly everybody—all my seniors and peers—was that it would be the death of me. They had reason on their side, but I had reason on my side. I came back because I wanted to."

Even against the advice of his mentors and peers, Wendell Berry left New York and set both his feet back on Kentucky soil and, with his family, began to build a future by building their own familial community, continuing in a tradition that had been set forth by the Berrys before them. Today, Berry farms and raises sheep. His son and daughter also have set up homes in Henry County and live off the land. Thus, Berry encourages writers to "Stop. Stop and pick a place and stay put." A solid physical, psychic and emotional center promotes a strong base for creative work, he suggests.

For Berry, a community is sustained by all the people sharing the same space, whether they are related by blood or not, and by the natural resources on the shared land—one is not more important than the other. It is no wonder then that Berry's literary offering has as its cornerstone that very sense of community that he describes. Community connects his characters to each other and is the literary foundation upon which his work rests. His essays especially are products of this philosophy; they express ideas that he says "moved me or scared me to death and got [me] into the fight and struggle. . . ."

In this way, Berry offers us more than a literary aesthetic; his vision is global and prescriptive. In the end, he offers us hope for sustaining the world through localized communities that have a strong sense of place. In his essay "The Long-Legged House," from *Collected Essays* (1993), he states that:

> A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives. Community is the people and the natural communities that are supposed to exist—the trees, the grasses, the animals, the birds, and so on. Everything has to be included and considered . . . that it might be possible to produce stable, locally adapted communities in America. The idea of a healthy community is an indispensable measure, just as the idea of a healthy child, if you're a parent, is an indispensable measure. You can't operate

> without it. Adding to knowledge is not the first necessity. The first necessity is to teach the young. If we teach the young what we already know, we would do outlandishly better than we're doing. Knowledge is overrated, you know. There have been cultures that did far better than we do, knowing far less than we know. We need to see that knowledge is overrated, but also that knowledge is not at all the same thing as "information."
>
> There's a world of difference between that information to which we now presumably have access by way of computers, libraries, and the rest of it, great stockpiles of data, and that knowledge that people have in their bones by which they do good work and live good lives. The knowledge that a good farmer has, for instance, is a far different thing from the knowledge that most university experts have. For one thing, a farmer's knowledge is usable knowledge; a lot of it comes from experience, and a lot is inherited. The knowledge of most university experts is self-centered—committed to their own advancement in their careers and therefore, indifferent to the effects of the work they're doing or going to do. And they're usually not committed to any community. (61)

For Berry then, a community is a spiritual and philosophical condition that grows out of a holistic connection to the land. He makes clear that there is a vast difference between useful "place-based knowledge" and the kind of antiseptic "information" that many universities are encouraging these days. But, for Berry, a healthy sense of community goes well beyond even an individual's self-conscious sense of place and connection to it. Community is more subtle and organic than just mere knowledge about a place. A community is a collectivity of knowledge, accumulated through life experiences together and is stored in the cultural memory of a group of people who are committed to interdependence. It is this holistic sense of a living community that is a clear and present theme in virtually all his texts of social activism (but it can be found also in his fiction and poetry). For example, in *Standing by Words*, Berry initiates a call to focus more on those things familial and on the local economy. But he points out that the local economy's outcomes aren't exclusively commercial. In Wendell Berry's economy, the most primal of outcomes is that of sustainability—finding, acknowledging and honoring what we have around us as what we need to live productively. The practice of sustaining ourselves, personally and our local economies financially, Berry believes, produces good work and good lives.

Wendell Berry's novels, *Jayber Crow,* and *A World Lost* show people attempting to find familial, economic and spiritual possibility literally growing out of a close connection with the land. Berry's creative non-fiction and essays from *Standing By Words*, *The Unsettling of America* and *Life is a Miracle* espouse connection and commitment to the American farmer. Berry's poetic husbandry—mastered quite obviously from his soulful shepherding of the land—is a graceful and harmonious link to people and to nature as well as to emotion. Sometimes pastoral, Berry's literary contributions, firmly rooted, have risen from the land and from and for its people. Berry develops in all his work a sense of the "bioregional"—a sense where the physical land and the communities that exist on that land can be expressed in a philosophy that enables his voice to be native to that specific place.

A good example of this concept is in this novel *Jayber Crow*. Like most of Berry's novels and short fiction, it is set in the fictionalized community of Port William, where Berry's idiosyncratic characters have bloomed over the course of several novels and short story collections. Jayber is the bachelor barber whose personality and belief system are much like the poet farmer, Wendell Berry himself. Berry began thinking about and making notes for this novel in the early 1980s, after he had been established as a second-generation leader in the emergent agricultural movement that espoused organic farming and had become a fixture in the movement's grassroots social activism.

Jayber Crow is a novel, told in first-person, constructed of stories set in Port William, a place where "loafing and wakefulness are two of the principal arts . . . maybe, too they pass for public duties. In the business places and the street, people loaf and talk to the point of discomfort and the neglect of other things" (299-300). Tenderly, Jayber tells of the connection to and disconnection from the land and its people during a time when farmers were pulled toward modernization through mechanical means. The authenticity or lack thereof in the characterizations of Burley Coulter, Cecelia Overhold, Troy Chatham and Athey Keith—all with agrarian vocations—and Jayber's daughter, Mattie, give voice to the possibility inherent in this Port William community during watershed times.

Jayber Crow always belonged to this small community. Whether in the familial habitat of his parents who died and the aunts and uncles who looked after him until their deaths from an influenza epidemic or within the broader community, especially in the orphanage where he lived and in the seminary that he attended before setting out for Port William. Jayber connected himself to and was accepted as a part of this small community defined by its locale, the similar interests of its inhabitants, and its communal institutions. Jayber finds a barbering job in Port William and pledges his undying love to Mattie Chatham. After a long stint as proprietor, the long-time eavesdropper, facing increasingly stricter health code enforcements for his barbershop from government inspectors, Jayber is forced to retire to a river shack to live upon the land.

In *Jayber Crow*, Berry applies his own brand of transcendental thought and social commentary to Port William and its people. Jayber's retirement from his Port William barbershop out to the river bottoms provides a venue for Berry to give Jayber a life of greater simplicity and fallowness just as Thoreau called for in *Walden*[2]. Through the characters of Jayber Crow, the Catletts and the Coulters, Berry's reader can experience a natural philosophy exemplified in the fictive world of Port William, a setting that remains as pristine and full of possibility as *Walden* itself continues to be for the pre-teens who experience it for the very first time. Berry points out that what Jayber sees "is a possibility of life, not the life: this, here, is what I've come to know as a life: it's a practical realization" (Berry, "Interview"). Jayber's life is experiencial, not theoretical or abstract.

Berry, much like Jayber, was a self-reliant youth in the tradition of Emerson and Thoreau. Although an avid reader, Berry found school and church confining and he sought out the wide open spaces of the farm and thicket of the Henry County landscape whose geography is made up primarily of hilly tracts of farmland, rolling valleys and wooded areas nestled in the Kentucky River Valley. Like Thoreau before him, he named and defined for himself his own sense of community as a young boy, swimming alone in the ponds on his family's farm and marching to the beat of his own "drummer."

Berry gives the precocious Andrew Catlett from his novel, *A World Lost* some of his own boyhood qualities. In the summer of 1944, ten years after Wendell Berry's own birth, the character, young Andrew Catlett, a maverick rule-breaker, has just emerged from a forbidden solo dip in the pond at the back of his home place and swims in this thought: "For a long time then I just sat in the grass, feeling clean and content, thinking perhaps of nothing all. I was nine years old, going on ten; having never needed to ask, I knew exactly where I was: I did not want to be anyplace else" (12). Andrew Catlett's sense of connection to the land and his playful naughtiness while digging into the easy countryside could be a page torn from Wendell Berry's own boyhood diary. "When I came over the ridge behind the house and barns and started down toward the lot gate, I was pretending to be a show horse . . . . And often when I was

out by myself I did the gaits" (13). Berry fills his young characters with freedom and possibility and places them in wide open spaces in which to embrace the soul-filling landscape and natural backdrops of their rural upbringing. Although *A World Lost* is Andrew Catlett's journey through the pain he carries after his favorite uncle, namesake and role model is murdered, the clear cool water of Chatham Spring, the fields full of tumble-bugs and meadowlarks, and a huge sky keep Andrew Catlett steady during his exploration of a truth that lands him in a great community of people who by their own sense of love, strength, grief and memory stand by him and his family. This time, through experiencing tragedy, the character understands instinctively about his own possibility, then realizes how important his local community's affirmation and loyalty to him is to his eventual evolution as an individual.

While community is the very essence of *Jayber Crow*, Berry's literary influences go far beyond the transcendental writings of Emerson and Thoreau. In fact, his relationship with his literary mentors is not always an easy one, especially when it comes to Berry's own concept of community. Take, for example, the "Notice" in the front of the novel that appears after the acknowledgments page:

> Persons attempting to find a "text" in this book will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a "subtext" in it will be banished; persons attempting to explain, interpret, explicate, analyze, deconstruct, or otherwise "understand" it will be exiled to a desert island in the company only of other explainers. BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR. (iii)

This "notice" is an obvious nod to Mark Twain and perhaps a reverent acknowledgment to Berry's favorite boyhood book, but the "notice" shouldn't be interpreted as a total embrace of *Huckleberry Finn*. Berry's literary foundation rests on a solid sense community and his strong commitment to it causes him to take an ambivalent stance toward Twain's masterwork. In the end, Berry believes that the beloved Huck Finn story ends without a foundation in the very sense of community that Berry advocates. Throughout his critical essay, "Writer and Region" that appeared in *The Hudson Review,* Berry criticizes Mark Twain as disparaging the very concept of community that he had been advocating:

> It is arguable, I think, that our country's culture is still suspended as if at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, assuming that its only choices are either a deadly "civilization" or piety and violence or an escape into some "Territory" where we may remain free of adulthood and community obligation. We want to be free; we want to have rights; we want to have power; we do not yet want much to do with responsibility. We have imagined the great and estimable freedom of boyhood, of which Huck Finn remains the finest spokesman. We have imagined the bachelorhoods of nature and genius and power: the contemplative, the artist, the hunter, the cowboy the general, the president—lives dedicated and solitary—in the Territory of individual adventure or responsibility. But boyhood and bachelorhood have remained our norms of "liberation" for women as well as men. We have hardly begun to imagine the coming to responsibility that is the meaning, and the liberation, of growing up. We have hardly begun to imagine community life, and the tragedy that is community life. (19)

Berry counts *Huckleberry Finn* as one of his favorite books having selected it for the first time from the bookshelf at his grandparents and reading it and re-reading it throughout the years of his childhood. Since the mid-1980s, Wendell Berry has been on the forefront of writing about community and his concept of bringing us back to where we are rooted. Berry seeks to ease the conflictedness he sees in the world and

its inhabitants flailing around searching for wholeness through power and promotion, yet yearning for familiarity and finding strength in what is stable and consistent from childhood. Berry insists that *Huckleberry Finn* encourages this suspension in "bachelorhood" by never allowing Huck to obtain any responsibility—a notion Berry believes stunts the growth of our nation. Power without responsibility forces consumption and fear as a means of hiding from the central self and origin. For years, Berry fished around the notion that such a classic as *Huckleberry Finn* baited little on the community hook:

> What is stunted is the growth of Huck's character. When Mark Twain replaces Huck as author, he does so apparently to make sure that Huck remains a boy. Huck's growing up, which through the crisis of his fidelity to Jim has been central to the drama of the book, is suddenly thwarted first by the Tom-foolery of Jim's "evasion," and then by Huck's planned escape to the "territory." The real "evasion" of the last chapter is Huck's or Mark Twain's evasion of the community responsibility which would have been a natural and expectable next step after his declaration of loyalty to his friend. Mark Twain's failure or inability to imagine this possibility was a disaster for his finest character, Huck, whom we next see, not as a grown man but as a partner to another boyish evasion, a fantastical balloon-excursion to the Pyramids. (20)

Berry interjects that *Huckleberry Finn* fails at imagining a responsible, adult community life—and Huck's adult possibility—because Huck was allowed to cling to his boyhood so he nor Mark Twain could enter into a community life.

Life Is A Miracle, an essay that expresses one of Wendell Berry's hopes at assisting the nation in reorienting itself, resonates with the inherent possibility present in the human condition. "Life, like holiness, can be known only by being experienced. To experience it is not to figure it out or even to understand it, but to suffer it and rejoice it as it is. . . . to treat life as less than a miracle, is to give up on it" (8-10).[3] He uses these ideas as the basic fabric for the essay's 153 pages whose subtitle is "An Essay Against Modern Superstition." The essay was written in support of his grassroots efforts in communicating his own and others' arguments to make the world a better place by acknowledging their own sense of community. Finding the possibility in ourselves and in our own lives without exhaustive investigation into a definite efficacious outcome is just the groundedness and holistic connectedness Berry gives to his many characters.

Although Wendell Berry isn't the first to discover possibility or to take action on its behalf, he has challenged himself with communicating that part of the human condition in front of a backdrop of landscape and community and spirituality[4]. Finding compassion for himself in the chaos, he writes in *Life Is a Miracle* of two human foibles: "We cannot live without acting. And we must act on what we know, and what we know is incomplete. How to act in ignorance is paramount and evil exists and is an ever-present and lively possibility. . . . I am perfectly ignorant of some things others know perfectly" (10-11). As humans, we are obligated by the fact that we are alive to act, and, as Berry puts forth in this passage, if we are finding our possibility as individuals, we act on information that is incomplete. Honoring our passion to live (much less record that passion through art) yet understanding that what we know about life is going to be inevitably incomplete, should be understood as one of our own human shortcomings. It is a humbling and challenging experience to acknowledge human and literary imperfections, while still unleashing the creativity from within. In the line, "I am perfectly ignorant of some things others know perfectly," Berry acknowledges his own humanity, and he accepts and embraces that imperfection. (It should be mentioned however that although Berry's writings have been a guide for

"back to the land" movements over the past decades, he rejects any "philosopher" categorization saying in an interview: "I decided ten years ago that I wasn't going to say words like spirituality because it's not fair to rank spirit and matter; mind and body or mind and matter." Yet, behind the humility, it is hard to ignore Berry's basic wisdom about the state of being human.)

Throughout *Life Is a Miracle* and his other essays, Berry acknowledges Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Man Thinking" from *The American Scholar* as an embracing of one's sense of place. *The American Scholar* is as much based on community as any Wendell Berry literary endeavor. Emerson suggests that to be "whole" (or perhaps, to manifest one's own possibility) the individual "must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers" (44). Indeed, a well known tenant of transcendentalism is that all souls—human, animal, and plant—are connected in a universal spirit. Thus, one aspect of community, for Berry, consists of individuals working separately, but in harmony with, other individuals and the land. Community is the expression of that "whole."

Since agriculture had been a lifelong interest of Berry's, in 1983 he left the academic community to devote more time to writing and to work his 125-acre farm at Port Royal, Kentucky in Henry County. He still lives and farms the land that has been in his family for generations with a respect for it rivaling Thoreau's. For nearly fifty years, Wendell Berry has been cultivating his own sense of possibility as a literary figure by writing about farming and community with Kentucky as a setting, reflecting his strong sense of place and community. His social activism is imbued with traditional values and strong family ties and he practices what he preaches, what might be called a "land ethic." He still heats his home with wood, for example, and employs only organic farming methods of fertilization and pest control. He plows his fields with horses and resorts to modern mechanical farm implements only when absolutely necessary. His literary life and his social life are symbiotic. Through his books, poems and creative non-fiction, he continues to inspire others to love and respect the land and for some, to discover their own literary possibility. If future generations have healthy land to farm, Wendell Berry's life vision will have been fulfilled. In all his writings, he has kept the same message: humans must learn to live in harmony with nature or realize they will perish.

Throughout Berry's writing, the most prominent, recurring theme is that all people in the society should be able to use the gifts (possibility) that they have, their natural abilities, and they ought to use them responsibly for their benefit as individuals as part of a community. But much of Berry's work is meant to be cautionary. He feels the modern world is in the process of devolving. As a symbol of that devolution he offers the degradation of language that is manifest throughout our culture. Berry shows how the deepened cleft between words and their referents mirrors the increasing isolation of individuals from their communities and of their communities from the land.

In the essay "People, Land and Community," Berry writes:

> People are joined to the land by work. Land, work, people, and community are all comprehended in the idea of culture. These connections cannot be understood or described by information—so many resources to be transformed by so many workers into so many products for so many consumers—because they are not quantitative. We can understand them only after we acknowledge that they should be harmonious—that a culture must be either shapely and saving or shapeless and destructive. To presume to describe land, work, people and community by information, by quantities, seems invariably to throw them into competition with one another. Work is then understood to exploit the land, the

> people to exploit their work, the community to exploit its people. And then instead of land, work, people and community, we have the industrial categories of resources, labor, management, consumers and government. We have exchanged harmony for interminable fuss and the work of culture for the timed and harried labor of an industrial economy. (73)

Contrary to the above modern linguistical trend, Berry plants the seeds of his beliefs in community throughout his poetry that indeed, embody the notion of holistic unity. The poem "The Wild Geese," from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, exemplifies his beliefs that a community can begin to ask if what it needs can be produced locally by local people and from the local landscape, and how it can be produced in a way that doesn't damage the local landscape or the local community. And by local community, Berry does not just mean the people. Possibility is as cogent a notion in "The Wild Geese" as is the idea of community:

> Horseback on Sunday morning
> Harvest over, we taste persimmon
> And wild grape, sharp sweet
> Of summer's end. In time's maze
> Over the fall fields, we name names
> That went west from here, names
> that rest on graves. We open
> a persimmon seed to find the tree
> that stands in promise,
> pale in the seed's marrow.
> Geese appear high over us,
> pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
> as in love or sleep, holds
> them to their way, clear,
> in the ancient faith: what we need
> is here. And we pray, not
> for new earth or heaven, but to be
> quiet in heart, and in eye
> clear. What we need is here. (1-19)

In this poem, the author suggests a sense of inherited community through which our own possibility is ever present: We can see the tree in the seed. People in their own self-discovery, like seeds, stand in promise to what they will become and how they will actualize their own possibility. This promise and hope of possibility and what Berry feels compelled to repeat ("What we need is here"[15, 19]) seems to exemplify the primary tenant of this poem, his activism and his body of literary work. Names resting on graves suggest the familial heritage passed down through the generations, and the remembering of the young and the old caring for each other is ever present. But, the familial connection isn't enough to sustain a community all on its own. "Geese appear high over us, / pass, and the sky closes" (11-12). Berry's image of geese (sometimes migratory and sometimes resident) as concrete examples of faith in natural instincts is almost religious. We—whether in a family or in a more transient or tribal community of friends, peers or colleagues—reflect the primal nature of these birds that mate for life and are sustained by a trust in the integrity of the flock[5].

Writers create from life experience a personal knowledge the intuition of a character's interiority. Nuances of spacing, caesura and rhythm in poetry transcend reason. We put pen to paper and meticulously edit, engaging in a process toward what we hope will be an outcome that reflects an ideal conception. No matter what form our creativity

takes, we escape from a known reality and move toward a possibility that transforms our imaginings into literature. And we do so with complete and imperturbable faith, just as wild geese must follow the unmarked migratory path.

In another poem, "Grace," also from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, Berry embraces stillness and breath and possibility by centering the reader in quiet nature, engaging and slowing the mind and summoning the intuitive notions found in transcendentalism. The final quote of the poem is from Berry's long-time friend and fellow Kentucky writer Gurney Norman:

> The woods is shining this morning
> Red, gold and green, the leaves
> lie on the ground or fall,
> or hang full of light in the air still
> perfect in its rise and in its fall, it takes
> the place it has been coming to forever.
> It has not hastened here, or lagged.
> See how surely it has sought itself,
> its roots passing lordly through the earth
> See how without confusion it is
> All that it is and how flawless
> its grace is. Running or walking, the way
> is the same. Be Still. Be Still.
> "He moves your bones, and the way is clear." (1-14)

As in "The Wild Geese," "Grace" uses repetition: "Be still. Be Still" (13). Like the agricultural term, lie fallow, Berry calls us to lie fallow ourselves; no matter how fast we go—running or walking—the way is the same. What we need is available here and now, no matter how fast or slow we go. There are different things we'll see *here* depending on our pace, but nonetheless, we are truly provided for. We are all that we are at any present moment as we progress toward the fulfillment of our own possibility. In the line, "All that it is and how flawless / its grace is" (10-11), Berry says he is hinting at the perfection of living in a moment and being inspired by it, making ourselves eligible for our own imaginings to grow into flesh and then be something more than just a ghost of ourselves—an incarnate principle—that manifests meaning.

Berry's writing—no matter the genre—gains sustenance from a few practical guidelines on how to sustain a place-based community enumerated in an essay entitled "Conserving Communities" from *Another Turn of the Crank* that appeared originally in *Harper's*. These guidelines form the cornerstone and foundation of all his artistic and activist endeavors.[6] (See below.) Each of Berry's rules contained in the community-building manifesto can be seen in the novel *Jayber Crow* that I discussed earlier. In some instances, the rules referenced can be subtle: "All the world as a matter of fact is a mosaic of little places invisible to the powers that be" (137); or "All you have to do is keep the thought in mind and Port William becomes visible" (142); or "I loved the different voices all singing one song, the various tones and qualities the passing lifts of feeling, rising up and going out forever" (162). Berry's guideline number 16 from the manifesto: "be acquainted with, and complexly connected with, community-minded people [different voices all singing one song] in nearby towns and cities" is a direct influence on the idea of "one song" as a metaphor for the sense of community that is expressed in the novel, yet "the song" being of "various tones and qualities" (different towns and cities) its "passing" inculcates "lifts of feeling rising up and going out forever," thus serving as a cohesive force on the individuals who make up the

community (18-20). Berry's fiction, poems or community activist essays are like a timbered choir resonating and echoing the meaning of the manifesto.

In other passages of *Jayber Crow*, the guidelines are full-out calls for change:

> He [Troy Chatham] enlarged his pride by investing it (as well as a lot of money, usually borrowed money) in equipment. And so then the equipment, the power to do things mechanically, became his point of reference. His question was what his equipment could do, not what the farm could stand. The farm, in a way, became his mirror. The farm never at any time was his reference point, and this was his bewilderment and his (and its) ruin. This was why he was reduced by everything he did to enlarge himself; it was why his life was all spending and no gain. (338)

Jayber's thoughts about Troy, Mattie's adulterous husband, are a direct reflection of the fifth entry in the manifesto: "Understand the ultimate unsoundness of the industrial doctrine of 'labor saving' if that implies poor work, unemployment, or any other kind of pollution or contamination." Berry creates a villain in Troy by having him break the covenant he made to Mattie and the one Mattie and her father made to the land.

Through his voice and social stance, Wendell Berry created a character in Jayber Crow who knows himself and manifests community through a sensitive, sympathetic love of home, country and the rural existence even without the presence of a family of origin in the purest sense. Without parents or siblings and without ever taking a wife, Jayber Crow finds his possibility by knowing and acknowledging himself. Jayber has this thought during his time in the community of the seminary he attended:

> There was less reason to break rules because there were not so many of them, but also I didn't want to be punished. I didn't want to get crosswise with anybody who had authority to punish me; I had had enough of that at The Good Shepherd. I didn't want ever again to stand in front of the desk of somebody who had more power than I had. If all that required was keeping a few rules that I didn't much object to, then I would keep the rule . . . . It was an atmosphere that I finally had to think about, and when I thought about it I had to admit that I could not get comfortable in it; I could not breathe a full breath in it . . . . it made me long for the open countryside and flowing streams. (47-48)

Through this self-awareness, Jayber knew his impossibility of becoming a preacher. His views and his faith presented divergent views to his teachers and fellow students. Jayber began to ask questions that his faith alone could not answer and that he, if he became a preacher, could not answer for his congregation. Jayber "wondered at" the division of the body and the soul: "It scared me a little when I realized that I saw it the other way around. But these preachers I'm talking about all thought that the soul had its face washed and its pants on and was in agony over having to associate with the flesh and the world. And yet these same people believed in the resurrection of the body" (49).

Throughout the totality of his work, Wendell Berry attempts to convince the reader that all we need is here, around us, if we'll only slow our minds and be eligible for our own possibility. Berry has found for himself and defined for others through fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry a local, place-based economy within community.

His characters, like Jayber Crow and Andrew Catlett, evolve through familial hope and community loyalty. If his fiction defines his literary landscape of the bumpy, hilly and sometimes treacherous terrain of life, then his essays suggest a clear path for navigating through the woody thickets. His poems are like parables and in friendship, landscape and community that make the challenging geography appear some-

how Godly. Through his writing, he continues to inspire others to love and respect the land and, for some, to discover their own literary possibility. He is a man who is truly standing by his words.

It has been nearly ten years since my first interview with Berry. Since then I have stood with him on several occasions supporting his activism, such as "I Love Mountain Day" this last February, and at the opening of the Berry Center in New Castle, Kentucky this past July. During occasions such as these, I am reminded of the impact one little poem can open up for a youngish writer. Now, with other interviews published and re-collected, other articles and blogs posted, I am still drawn out to the old road and hope I'll be interviewing Wendell Berry for many years to come. He continues to be my literary mentor and a living inspiration to me as I continue my own work, finding my own possibility and community.

Notes

1. Soren Kierkegaard, the Dutch psychoanalyst, theologian and philosopher thought of possibility as truth of character or authenticity. In *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker, Kierkegaard is cited as saying that those who are denying their possibility are: "inauthentic in that they do not belong to themselves, are not 'their own' person, do not act from their own center, do not see reality on its terms; they are the one dimensional men totally immersed in the fictional games being played in their society, unable to transcend their social conditioning" (73). Kierkegaard offers more on possibility: "If one will compare the tendency to run wild in possibility with the efforts of a child to enunciate words, the lack of possibility is like being dumb . . . for without possibility, a man cannot, as it were, draw breath (79).

2. "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to 'glorify God and enjoy him forever.'" (Thoreau 86)

3. Berry may be taking a cue here from *Walden*, when Thoreau says he wanted to "drive life into a corner and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meaniness of it….or if it were sublime, to know it by experience" (86). Indeed Thoreau goes on to say that he did not, when he came to die, want to "discover that [he] had not lived…living is so dear" (86). Living without judgment or qualification fosters mutual respect between individuals and the environment.

4. Wendell Berry's social activism and writings on sustaining community have been referenced throughout contemporary literary, agrarian and spiritual texts. Acclaimed spiritual writer Matthew Fox found it most important to define community in the introduction of his newest revolutionary and controversial work of groundbreaking, contemporary religious thought, *Original Blessings*: "For too long, Christians seeking comfort have been defining community as a noun. In fact, community is people building something together, working on a common project (cum-munio). To throw ourselves into a common project of retrieving wisdom for an ecological era, this is no small task, no mean adventure" (25-26). Throughout the text, Fox references Wendell Berry's work to further define community as an invitation to others to acquire possibility together. Fox, like Berry, establishes community for his readers before he attempts to present other information.

Further, Fox, encourages possibility with this passage from *The Unsettling of America*:

"Today, most of our people are so conditioned that they do not wish to harrow clods whether with an old horse or with a new tractor . . . but the care of the earth is our most ancient and most worthy and after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it, and to foster its renewal, is our only legitimate hope" (14).

5. Transcendental thought may have influenced "The Wild Geese" with its beliefs that the basic truths of the universe lie beyond the knowledge we obtain from our senses. . . [and] transcend what we hear or see or glean from books. It is through intuition that we "know" the existence of our own souls and their relation to a reality beyond the physical world. Intuition, which Emerson called the "highest power of the soul," is a power that "never reasons, never proves, it simply perceives . . . ." (Hodgkins 180)

6. How can a sustainable local community (which is to say a sustainable local economy) function? I am going to suggest a set of rules that I think such a community would have to follow. I hasten to say that I do not understand these rules as predictions; I am not interested in foretelling the future. If these rules have any validity, it is because they apply now.

Supposing that the members of a local community wanted their community to cohere, to flourish, and to last, they would:

1. Ask of any proposed change or innovation: What will this do to our community? How will this affect our common wealth?
2. Include local nature—the land, the water, the air, the native creatures—within the membership of the community.
3. Ask how local needs might be supplied from local sources, including the mutual help of neighbors.
4. Supply local needs first (and only then think of exporting their products, first to near by cities, and then to others).
5. Understand the ultimate unsoundness of the industrial doctrine of "labor saving" if that implies poor work, unemployment, or any other kind of pollution or contamination.
6. Develop properly scaled value-adding industries for local products in order not to become merely a colony of the national or the global economy.
7. Develop small-scale industries and businesses to support the local farm or forestry economy.
8. Strive to produce as much of their own energy as possible.
9. Strive to increase earnings (in whatever form) within the community, and decrease expenditures outside the community.
10. Circulate money within the local economy for as long as possible before paying it out.
11. Invest in the community to maintain its properties, keep it clean (without dirtying some other place), care for its old people, and teach its children.
12. Arrange for the old and the young to take care of one another, eliminating institutionalized "child care" and "homes for the aged." The young must learn from the old, not necessarily and not always in school; the community knows and remembers itself by the association of old and young.
13. Account for costs that are now conventionally hidden or "externalized." Whenever possible they must be debited against monetary income.
14. Look into the possible uses of local currency, community-funded loan programs, systems of barter, and the like.
15. Be aware of the economic value of neighborliness -- as help, insurance, and so on. They must realize that in our time the costs of living are greatly increased by the loss of neighborhood, leaving people to face their calamities alone.
16. Be acquainted with, and complexly connected with, community-minded people in nearby towns and cities.
17. Cultivate urban consumers loyal to local products to build a sustainable rural economy, which will always be more cooperative than competitive. (18-21)

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